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SUBJECT: QATARI MFA MINSTATE: RELATIONS WITH IRAN PROTECT  
QATAR'S INTERESTS

Classified By: Ambassador Joseph E. LeBaron, for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

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(C) KEY POINTS  
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-- Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Ahmed Al-Mahmoud told Ambassador February 2 that Qatar must rely on itself to protect Qatar's interests. This is especially true in the case of Iran, with which Qatar shares one of the largest gas fields in the world.

-- Al-Mahmoud made clear that Qatar knows Iran; it well understands Iran's ambitions as well as the danger it poses to Qatar.

-- Qatar's biggest worry is that the USG will secretly work out a regional arrangement with Iran at Qatar's strategic expense, Al-Mahmoud said.

-- To illustrate how crucial the relationship with Iran is to Qatar, Al-Mahmoud recounted the sensitive negotiation in 1993 with Iran over Iran's intent to redraw its maritime boundaries in the Gulf. The new boundary would have given Iran more of the Qatar's central source of wealth, the North Field.

-- Ambassador observed that the U.S. and Qatar may have much to be gained from engaging each other on dealing with the Iranian threat. Al-Mahmoud agreed and said Qatar would welcome such a dialogue.

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(C) COMMENTS  
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-- At its core, Qatar's relationship with Iran is based on fear; the existential fear that Iran, if roused sufficiently, can destroy Qatar's surging economy and developing society by taking action against Qatar's critically-important North Field.

-- It is an exaggerated fear, perhaps, but something like that has happened to Qatar before, and within recent national memory. In the 1930's, a foreign state, Japan, ruined the Qatari economy when it introduced the cultured-pearl industry. The ensuing economic collapse on the Qatari peninsula was so severe that Qatari society disintegrated. That is, significant numbers of the population had to emigrate, well into the 1940's and as far away as Somalia, to escape wide-spread hunger and unemployment.

-- Now, with Qatar's accumulating wealth, the stakes just grow higher.

-- All this suggests that, if Qatar is ever to break free of the Iranian orbit, then its fear of Iran will have to be addressed. Reduce the fear, and we reduce the pressure Qatar feels toward placating Iran politically and economically.

-- There are several ways to do this. One way: increase the political and military confidence Qatar has in the United States, in terms of Iran's role in the region.

-- Al-Mahmoud's comments give us a roadmap for accomplishing that: a) open a substantive dialogue with Qatar on Iran; b) identify overlapping concerns about Iran, and c) use those concerns to expand common ground between the U.S. and Qatar on how to deal with Iran. d) consult Qatar and keep it informed as U.S. thinking about Iran evolves;

-- A collateral benefit to this approach: we anchor Qatar more firmly in the Arab camp.

End Key Points and Comments.

¶1. (C) In a February 2 meeting with Ambassador, Minister of State Ahmed Al-Mahmoud categorically rejected the notion that Qatar stands outside the Arab "moderate camp." He asserted that only Qatar "can trust itself to protect (its) interests." It's in Qatar's interest, for example, to maintain a relationship with Iran, he said. Qatar, after all, shares a natural gas field with Iran. (Note: this is the largest nonassociated gas field in the world). Revenues from it fund the implementation of Qatar's strategic national vision of advancing economic opportunity through education.

¶2. (C) Because Qatar wants peace with its neighbors, Al-Mahmoud said Qatar is "working hard" to bring around Iran on the need to open up, as Qatar has done, to educating its people and enriching their economic opportunities.

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¶3. (C) Turning to Qatar's relationship with Israel, Al-Mahmoud stated, without offering specifics, that Iran pressures Qatar to get tough on Israel. In the end, though, Qatar acts to protect its interests -- in dealing with Iran, Israel, and other countries.

¶4. (C) Al-Mahmoud said he had told Ambassador's predecessor that Qatar first and foremost must protect its interests. Agitated that some parties believe Qatar does not recognize the Iranian threat, Al-Mahmoud said, "We are not stupid. We know Iran's ambitions." No country can dictate to Qatar how best to look out for its own interests.

¶5. (C) Qatar's biggest concern, Al-Mahmoud told Ambassador, is not knowing what kind of relationship the U.S. will have with Iran in the future. "We worry we'll be stabbed in the back over Iran." Washington, Qatar feared, will secretly work out a regional arrangement with Iran at Qatar's strategic expense. In this vein, Al-Mahmoud had told Javier Solana that it was wrong for him as an EU representative to offer Iran incentives to change policies (as the West would like) without GCC buy-in.

¶6. (C) Al-Mahmoud said it was out of fear of Iran that Qatar supported Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Qatar started out, like Oman, as a neutral party in the Iran-Iraq war. Saddam never forgot. Even after that war ended and another began, Saddam sought to get back at Qatar. As "punishment" for Qatar's earlier behavior, Saddam in January 1991 fired two missiles at Doha, illustrating how precarious it is for a small state like Qatar to remain neutral in the region.

¶7. (C) Al-Mahmoud, noting Iran and Qatar had agreed on the Gulf border between them in 1969 under the Shah, said Qatar grew concerned in 1993 when Iran's revolutionary government enacted a new law extending Iran's borders with all neighboring Gulf states, effectively extending Iran's control over the natural gas field that it shares with Qatar. The GOQ asked Iran to issue another, Qatar-specific law clarifying that Iran's border with Qatar was the same as that agreed upon in 1969. Iran balked at passing a law unique to

Qatar but did agree to issue a public statement at the UN in New York that the earlier 1969 border (more favorable to Qatar) remained valid. The public statements sufficiently clarified the matter for Qatar. The lesson, said Al-Mahmoud, is that "all negotiations with Iran are difficult. We have some experience."

¶8. (C) Al-Mahmoud said he offered this background because, "Even if our policies are not the same as yours, we are always thinking of America." It hurts Qatar when press reports falsely claim that Israel is killing Palestinians with phosphorous shells supplied out of Al-Udeid Air Base (a Qatari facility that hosts the largest U.S. air operations in the region). Sitting quietly is "hard to take, but we try not to reply."

¶9. (C) Ambassador observed that the U.S. and Qatar may have much to be gained from engaging each other on dealing with the Iranian threat. Al-Mahmoud agreed and said Qatar would welcome such a dialogue.

LeBaron